

The 2008 Presidential Primaries: What in America's Name Is Going On?

Although every presidential campaign sees unexpected twists and turns, the 2008 presidential race has unquestionably featured more surprises and greater volatility than any in 40 years. In fact, it was 40 years ago in the 1968 campaign when antiwar Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.) came within seven points of upsetting President Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. Subsequently, Senator Robert Kennedy (D-N.Y.) seized the momentum and the mantle of change from McCarthy before civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, resulting in riots in many major U.S. cities, and Kennedy himself was assassinated on the night of his California primary win. Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.) went on to win the Democratic nomination despite six other candidates having won more primary votes.

That year also saw former vice president Richard Nixon come back from political oblivion after losses in the 1960 presidential and 1962 California gubernatorial campaigns, the entry of Governor George Wallace (D-Ala.) as an independent candidate, and Nixon edging out Humphrey in a tight race with Wallace splintering off conservative Democrats, many of whom would never return to the Democratic column. Only that year could match the turbulence and unexpected developments and dynamics that have come into play over the last year and a half, and that seem to be continuing.

Over the last 18 months, Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) went from front-runner to dead in the water in the summer of 2007, followed by the political equivalent of a series of roman candles with former New York City mayor Rudy

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Giuliani, former senator and Hollywood actor Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.), former governor Mitt Romney (R-Mass.), and former governor Mike Huckabee (R-Ark.) launching their presidential bids, and then fizzling and plummeting. In each case, there were signs of potential and upward movement, followed by faltering. Only then did McCain make a Lazarus-like comeback and capture the nomination with little money, surely the first presidential candidate in 40 years to win a nomination without having a pollster on the payroll (he no longer could afford one after September 2007 and did not rehire one until April 2008).

For Democrats, watching Senator Barack Obama (Ill.), who five years ago was a relatively unknown African-American state senator from Chicago, eclipse established political figures such as former senator John Edwards (N.C.), Governor Bill Richardson (N.M.), Senator Joe Biden (Del.), and Senator Chris Dodd (Conn.) and be on the verge of edging out Senator Hillary Clinton (N.Y.) and the formidable Clinton political operation has been truly something to behold. All of the fundamentals seemed to argue that Clinton would beat Obama, but the 46-year-old has become a phenomenon whose time, at least within the Democratic Party, has clearly come.

The Year and the Context

Heading toward the summer of 2008, national polls and state-by-state electoral college analyses point toward another very close race, just as the last two have been. Yet, the fact that McCain is running even in some polls and slightly ahead or behind in others, with roughly a 50-50 chance of winning the general election, is pretty amazing given the virtual 50-mile-per-hour political headwind that he, as the Republican nominee, is facing this year. It is difficult to imagine a set of circumstances more challenging for a Republican to face.

Historically, political parties have a difficult time winning the presidency for three elections in a row. Since the end of World War II, one party has held the White House for two consecutive terms on five separate occasions. Four times out of the five—in 1960 (President Dwight Eisenhower), 1968 (Presidents John F. Kennedy/Johnson), 1976 (Presidents Nixon/Gerald Ford) and 2000 (President Bill Clinton)—they were not successful in holding on to the White House for a third consecutive term. After eight years of one party in the White House, a “time for a change” dynamic almost inevitably begins to build, putting the incumbent party at a significant disadvantage.

The only time a party has successfully held the office for three terms was after President Ronald Reagan’s eight years in office, when he had a job approval rating in the mid-50s in the fall of 1988, at least 25 points higher than President George W. Bush’s approval ratings are right now. The “time for a

change” sentiment that usually builds up over eight years of any party in the White House was not as high in 1988, and Democrats nominated a weak candidate in Governor Michael Dukakis (Mass.), allowing the GOP the opportunity to extend their White House lease for one more term.

After the less than auspicious end to the 12-year Republican control of Congress in 2006, the GOP encountered a series of problems, including financial, political, and sexual scandals for Republicans on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue; a controversial war in Iraq; the president's handling of Hurricane Katrina; a federal budget that had gone from surplus to deficit during his presidency; an economy slowing down to the verge of a recession; and fallout over their stand on embryonic stem cell research and intervention in the case of incapacitated patient Terry Schiavo. Entering the 2008 election cycle, a starkly different set of circumstances were in place than when Republicans took the White House back in 2000 and won the presidency again in 2004, not to mention a drastically different environment than when the party last won a third consecutive term in 1988.

Republicans have dropped from parity in party affiliation nationwide to a deficit of anywhere from eight points, in a January poll by RT Strategies for the Cook Political Report, to 19 points in a late March survey by Pew Research Center. Democrats have not so much gained ground over the last four years as Republicans have lost supporters, with increasing numbers of voters identifying themselves as independents and showing far greater sympathies with Democrats when asked which way they leaned.

Party affiliation is important because roughly 90 percent of voters end up casting their ballots for the presidential candidate of the party with which they identify at that time. Exit polls in 2004 showed that 89 percent of voters who identified themselves as Democrats cast ballots for Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) while 93 percent of Republicans voted for Bush. Thus, going from parity to a deficit of even just eight points is an enormous handicap.

This falloff in identification with the Republican Party spills over broadly into voter preferences for various offices. When Democratic pollster Peter Hart and his Republican counterpart, Bill McInturff, conducted their early March survey for NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*, asking voters whether they preferred a Democrat or Republican to win the presidency, Democrats had a 13-point advantage, 50 percent to 37 percent, up from nine- and 10-point advantages in September and November 2007, respectively. The NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll found similar numbers in the preferences for

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control of Congress, with a 14-point Democratic advantage, 49 percent to 35 percent. These numbers were almost identical to those found by the Gallup Organization one month earlier.

All of these are various manifestations of a morale problem within the Republican Party. GOP partisans seem more demoralized than they have since the mid-1970s during the Watergate scandal, whereas Democrats seem unusually energized. Gallup asked voters in February if, compared to previous elections, they were more or less enthusiastic about voting. Seventy-nine

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percent of Democrats said they were more enthusiastic than normal, and 15 percent were less enthusiastic. Only 44 percent of Republicans were more enthused, and 48 percent were less motivated. The NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll in early March asked voters how interested they were in this election, on a scale of one to 10, with one being “not at all interested” and 10 being “very interested.” Seventy-two percent of Democrats said that they were 10s, compared to just 63 percent of Republicans.

This is not to argue that Republicans will not vote in normal numbers this November. This is a presidential year and very likely to be a very high turnout election. Republicans had every reason in the world to stay home in the November 2006 midterm elections, but their turnout was down only slightly from past midterm performance. More plausible is that Democrats might vote in unusually high numbers, given higher voter turnout among Democrats in their presidential primaries and caucuses this year than among Republicans.

In terms of Congress, these circumstances combine with the fact that many more Republican incumbents than Democrats have opted not to seek reelection, opening their seats up to a greater risk of turnover in most cases. GOP losses in the Senate and House are thus quite likely. Five senators have announced that they are not seeking reelection, all five being Republicans (this does not include Senator Trent Lott [Miss.], who simply resigned, with Representative Roger Wicker [Miss.] appointed to take his place). In the House, 26 Republican and just seven Democratic incumbents have indicated that they are not seeking reelection.

Although not all of these open seats are highly vulnerable to Democratic takeover, many are. Republicans are currently expected to lose between three and six net Senate seats and between five and 15 House seats this fall. With Democrats raising significantly more money than Republicans in the congressional races for the first time in memory, this outcome is even more likely to occur. All of this will not likely give Democrats a veto-proof Congress or even

a filibuster-proof Senate, but it would give Democrats a firmer hold on both chambers.

In the face of all of this, it is remarkable that McCain runs even in the national polls with Obama and Clinton. State-by-state electoral college rundowns similarly show a general election that is too close to call, likely to turn on events that have not yet occurred and circumstances that have yet to develop.

McCain's Nomination

Historically, the Republican nomination process has been hierarchical. The nomination went to an heir apparent, usually the political figure whose "turn it was" to be the nominee. Others might contest that decision, but the heir apparent generally got the nomination. Although McCain's nomination could be seen as that happening once again, perhaps a more fitting explanation is that his nomination is proof that politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

After his campaign ran out of money in the summer of 2007, causing the departure of most of his campaign team, the Republican nomination was wide open. For two decades, the GOP had been seeking a new Reagan. The late president has become an iconic figure for the Republican Party just as President Franklin Roosevelt and later Kennedy have become for Democrats. Giuliani, Thompson, Romney, and Huckabee all had their auditions, but none measured up.

McCain's 2007 apparent but not eventual flameout appears to have had a number of causes. First, there seemed to be an inherent contradiction in McCain's candidacy. When he sought the GOP nomination in 2000, he ran as a maverick, an independent-thinking political free spirit riding on a bus named the "Straight Talk Express." McCain seemed to think nothing of offending the sensibilities of some of the party's most entrenched constituencies, and indeed he seemed to revel in it. McCain seemed to openly defy some of the most ardent leaders in the economic and culturally conservative factions of the party, up to and including the late Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, a lobby with an evangelical Christian-oriented agenda. McCain's candidacy fought head on with that of then-Governor Bush in one of the most bitter intra-Republican presidential nomination fights in modern history.

McCain painfully learned the same lesson that former senator Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) was learning on the Democratic side that same year: major political parties rarely nominate mavericks for president. Party nomination contests are dominated by party regulars, by the establishment, who view mavericks as undependable and troublemakers.

McCain thus seemed to spend the next seven years cultivating many of his former rivals in the establishment and among the GOP's most conservative

activists, campaigning relentlessly for Bush's 2004 reelection campaign and for particularly ardent conservative Republican candidates from coast to coast, occasionally even siding with the most ideological candidates in primary fights instead of with moderates closer to his own personal politics. He even made peace with Falwell in what turned out to be the last months of the evangelical leader's life, agreeing to deliver the commencement address at Falwell's Liberty University.

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Many who had been enthusiastic supporters of the maverick McCain were dismayed to see him curry favor with his former rivals, particularly Falwell. They wondered whether they could trust this McCain 2.0, whether he had disembarked from the Straight Talk Express. At the same time, many conservatives and members of the party establishment still remembered McCain's past transgressions: his

opposition to Bush's tax cuts; his coauthorship of the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill, which was seen as an unacceptable governmental intrusion on free speech; and his opposition to the handling of detainees at Guantanamo Bay and other U.S. facilities. As a result, McCain ended up in political purgatory, no longer trusted by many who liked the maverick McCain yet still not embraced by the establishment and conservatives who were reluctant to forgive him.

The second cause of McCain's 2007 implosion would seem to be the product of the war in Iraq, which he enthusiastically supported. McCain's candidacy seemed to lose altitude in the second half of 2006 as the war seemed to become more difficult each month and casualties rose dramatically. McCain's candidacy was not able to stabilize and to once again gain altitude until after the troop surge was implemented and had time to take hold, casualties began to decline, and the situation stabilized.

The third cause of McCain's 2007 problems was the immigration issue. Although the United States in general and the Republican Party in particular is of at least two minds on immigration, the pro-immigration reform side—the side most open to immigration and the side that McCain and Bush shared—was distinctly not where the passion and the zeal in the GOP was to be found. The loudest and most heartfelt emotions in the Republican Party were to be found on the anti-immigration side. As immigration rose as an issue, it became more and more of a problem for McCain. McCain was not able to move beyond immigration until it subsided as an issue. Although it remains a deeply divisive issue in some parts of the country and in some corners of the party, it seems to have lost a bit of its edge.

Finally, McCain had a fundraising problem. In 2006 and early 2007, he put together a fabulous, world-class campaign organization, combining veterans of his own 2000 campaign with some of the best operatives from Bush's two presidential campaigns and other top operatives in the party. It was an enormously talented but very expensive operation. Yet, like many other ardent advocates of campaign finance reform, McCain has a distaste for fundraising and for courting many of the donors that are needed in order to raise the millions needed to mount a presidential campaign.

With McCain hardly a natural and gifted fundraiser, the financing of his campaign seemed predicated on the inevitability of his nomination. Republicans would just give money to his campaign because he was going to be the nominee, not out of love, affection, or even for having been aggressively courted. Once these previously articulated factors began to raise questions about the inevitability of his nomination, his money began to dry up, and with it his campaign.

McCain's Rivals

While McCain's candidacy seemed to be in the process of collapsing, Giuliani was boosted to the top in national polls by his image as "America's Mayor," stemming from his performance after the September 11 attacks. Yet, Giuliani failed to ignite support in key early states, preventing him from gaining momentum or even staying relevant before the calendar of primaries moved to states where he had greater potential. Furthermore, his brash New York style failed to translate well west of the Hudson River, and his liberal positions on social and cultural issues as well as his colorful, problematic personal life proved to be too much for a fundamentally conservative party in which personal mores are highly relevant.

Although some Republicans hoped and expected that Thompson would turn into a latter-day Reagan, his late and disorganized start, lackadaisical style of campaigning, and inability to raise money soon became apparent, making his the briefest of the surge-and-declines of the campaign year.

Many picked Romney early on as a potential nominee, seeing his reputation as a brilliant and effective world-class business executive with strong management skills, movie-star good looks, and a personal fortune to spend on his campaign as the perfect combination for a party that had seen its reputation as the party of competence sullied in recent years. Romney's Mormon faith presented its own unique challenge, frequently compared with Kennedy's Catholic faith being an issue in 1960, but the more likely explanation for Romney's failure to succeed was his campaign's decision to position him as the most conservative candidate in the field rather than as a brilliant and

effective manager. Having run twice and been elected once in Massachusetts, one of the most liberal states in the nation, and having taken liberal positions on such issues as abortion, gun control, and gay rights before switching stands prior to his presidential race, this effort to position him as an ideologue was both implausible and unconvincing.

Huckabee boasted an impressive record as governor of Arkansas, clearly the strongest communications and speaking skills in the GOP field, and a perfect conservative record on cultural issues, but he failed to secure significant support beyond the ranks of social, cultural, and religious conservatives. There seemed to be a strong bias against Huckabee, a former Baptist minister, among secular Republicans, whose priorities were economic or foreign policy issues. For once, strong conservative stands on cultural issues seemed an impediment to a Republican nomination, and his failure to win significant crossover support beyond evangelical Christians and cultural conservatives doomed his candidacy.

The failure of Giuliani, Thompson, Romney, and Huckabee simply left a vacuum in the GOP field, allowing McCain—a tenacious contender with a strong personality, a compelling personal life story, the understanding of presidential election campaigns, skills developed from his 2000 White House bid, and, notwithstanding the *New York Times* story suggesting an improper relationship with a telecommunications lobbyist, the most favorable press coverage of any Republican candidate in a half century—to fill the void. A candidate less stubborn and determined would have dropped out of the race last summer, but no one ever accused McCain of being timid or shirking a fight.

The Democratic Nomination

English author Samuel Johnson once wrote that second marriages are the triumph of hope over experience. In some ways, that is exactly where the battle lines for the Democratic nomination fight between Obama and Clinton formed.

A late January and early February 2008 national poll for ABC News and the *Washington Post* asked respondents which is more important for a candidate for president: “strength and experience” or “new direction and new ideas.” In that survey, 46 percent of Democrats cited strength and experience as more important and 45 percent chose new direction and new ideas, very nearly an even split. Of the 46 percent that chose strength and experience as the most important factor, 75 percent preferred Clinton to just 17 percent who preferred Obama. Of the 45 percent that felt that new direction and new ideas were more important, however, 70 percent supported Obama and just 22 percent picked Clinton. Although it is certainly unfair to say that Clinton has no hope

or that Obama has no experience, the cleavage in the party jumps out in this data. One-half of the party was looking for one set of qualities, and the other half was looking for a very different set.

The most astonishing aspect of this contest is that virtually all of the fundamentals that political analysts looked at in 2007 to anticipate the outcome argued that Clinton would win the Democratic nomination. Normally, if one candidate for the Democratic nomination begins with a strong base among those with a high school education or less and the other candidate has a strong base among those with at least some college education or more, the candidate strongest with the far more numerous less-educated prevails. Looking back at 2007 polls, Clinton had a clear edge among Democrats who had not attended any college.

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Similarly, if one Democratic candidate begins with a base among those with incomes below \$50,000 and the other is stronger with those above \$50,000, the candidate strongest among the more numerous lower-income group usually prevails. Clinton was stronger with Democrats making less than \$50,000, Obama with the more affluent, again giving the advantage to Clinton.

Given that men tend to gravitate more toward the Republican Party and women to Democrats, it is normal that roughly 55 percent of the vote in Democratic primaries is female. Indeed, in many primaries this year, it was 57 percent or more. Clinton was stronger with women, and Obama did better among men. Once again, advantage Clinton.

Candidates who are strongest among strong party members generally prevail over those who are strongest among independents who just lean toward that party or among weak partisans. There are simply more strong partisans who usually participate in the nomination process than independents and weak partisans. Clinton did better among Democratic regulars, and Obama did better with independents who leaned to the Democratic side and to Democrats with the weakest partisan attachment. Still, the advantage is Clinton's.

With older voters more numerous and turning out at higher levels, a candidate such as Clinton who performed better among voters over 50 years of age would be considered to be at an advantage over one with strength among those under 50. Yet again, the advantage goes to Clinton.

Finally, establishment candidates nearly always trump insurgents and mavericks, just as former vice president Walter Mondale beat back Senator Gary Hart (D-Colo.)'s challenge in 1984 and Vice President Al Gore held off Bradley in 2000. Party nominations are generally determined by party loyalists, those in or

sympathetic to the establishment rather than outsiders and those on the edge of the party. Add in the residual goodwill and the organizational and fundraising advantages that Clinton and her husband should have had over their less established upstart rival, and the outcome would seem to have been clear.

Yet, Obama, who started out with a base in the weaker position in each of these pairings and who, prior to the Iowa caucus, did not even command strong support in the African-American community—many of whom assumed he had little chance of winning or could not identify with him—started on the edge and has expanded his base of support. He has expanded it to the point where he has not only eclipsed more established rivals such as Edwards, Biden, Dodd, and Richardson, but appears to have edged out Clinton and the vaunted Clinton political operation. It was as if the laws of physics were suspended; the laws of traditional voting behavior seemed not to apply this year.

The Obama Phenomenon

If a chemistry professor were attempting to diagram the elements of Obama's appeal, it might look like this. First, take "the future," "new ideas," and a "change" approach to issues that previous New Age Democratic presidential candidates such as Hart in 1984 and Bradley in 2000 articulated in their bids for the Democratic presidential nomination. The appeals were not so much driven by ideology or really by many specific issues, but by the mantra that change and ideas are good, and the more the better.

Next, add idealism, romanticism, symbolism, and the power of a handsome, young, charming, charismatic, even glamorous figure, a modern-day Kennedy with the hope and implied promise of a return to Camelot. Again, this is not driven by ideology or issues, but an emotional and inspirational attraction, one that resonates far better among the young and more independent minded, but also with a contagious effect that eventually wins over more than a few older and more partisan Democrats.

Third, add in what has become one of the newest of Washington buzz phrases: "post partisan," an appeal or approach to politics that portrays itself as beyond traditional partisan politics, as personified by the Bushes, Clintons, Doles, and others who have dominated the two major parties for some time. Whether Obama in fact is this transcendent political figure is open to personal interpretation, but he certainly attempts to project that image and is seen by his backers in that way. He is further helped by concerns that Americans are creating familial dynasties, with seven of the last 10 major party nominees of the Bush, Clinton, or Dole families.

Fourth, add in the symbolism and historic nature that many Democrats see in nominating and potentially electing Obama as president of the United

States, particularly in the fortieth year after King's assassination. Yet, one might also think (and Clinton hoped and assumed) that nominating and electing the first woman president would be historically important, particularly with a majority of voters being women.

Finally, with Bush a much-reviled figure among Democrats and independents, carrying late spring job-approval ratings of just 28 percent, Clinton would seem to represent a dramatic change from the incumbent. Yet, Obama has come to be seen as the anti-Bush, someone who would show the world that the United States had repudiated Bush and shown repentance for having elected and reelected him. Inexplicably, Clinton does not seem to be enough change from Bush, and Obama is the real change.

These factors added together seemed to create the political equivalent of nitroglycerin in the Democratic Party, obliterating the presidential aspirations of Edwards, Richardson, Biden, and Dodd while putting Obama on the cusp of edging out Clinton for the Democratic nod, a scenario that just four years ago would have seemed inexplicable.

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The General Election

The 2000 presidential general election basically came down to one state: Florida, with Bush prevailing over Gore by just 537 votes out of almost 5 million ballots cast in the state. In 2004, the election came down to Ohio, with Bush again winning, this time by 118,599 out of almost 5.6 million cast. It was not quite as close as four years earlier, but still very close, with the outcome not clear until the very end. Exit polls even suggested that Kerry would win. Although the dynamics of 2008 are very different from those of four and eight years ago, the signs currently are pointing toward yet another very close race.

National polls show that regardless of whether Democrats nominate Obama or Clinton, either one would be essentially tied with McCain. Their support among various specific groups would differ greatly, with Obama outperforming Clinton and carrying historically high support among the best-educated voters, while Clinton carried the party's traditional strength among less educated voters. Obama does extraordinarily well with younger voters yet underperforms among older ones; Clinton does better with older voters and underperforms among younger ones. Either way, both run essentially even with McCain.

From an electoral college perspective, with 270 electoral votes needed to win, Democrats begin with 10 states and the District of Columbia solidly in their camp, for a total of 165 electoral votes, and Republicans have 19 states

holding 157 votes. Three more states with 18 electoral votes are likely but not solidly in the Democratic camp, while Republicans will have four more states with 37 electoral votes likely in their column, bringing the cumulative totals to 183 for Democrats and 194 for Republicans.

Next, Democrats have five states with 59 electoral votes that are leaning their way: Michigan, New Hampshire, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Five states are the early toss-ups, with another nine only leaning one way or the other.

This brings the totals to 19 states (including D.C.) with 242 electoral votes that are leaning, likely, or solidly in the Democratic column, 28 short of the 270 needed to win the presidency. For Republicans, Arkansas, Florida, Ohio, and Virginia lean their way with 66 electoral votes, bringing their totals up to 27 states with 260 electoral votes, 10 short of the 270 needed to win.

That leaves five states with a total of 36 electoral votes as toss-ups: Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, and New Mexico. Democrats need 28 of the 36 electoral votes, and Republicans need 10 of these 36.

This electoral map and this election are incredibly volatile. Fourteen states that are in the toss-up or leaning columns are effectively up for grabs, and there will certainly be ups and downs for each party in each column. There also may be surprises, with a state on one side or the other popping out of one of the likely columns either to appear to be in play or to genuinely come into play.

This election is likely to turn on events that have not yet occurred and circumstances that have not yet developed. How will the still relatively unknown Obama be seen as he becomes better defined in voters' minds? Turning 72 years of age in August, will McCain be perceived as experienced and wise or as too old and living in the past? What roles will the war in Iraq and the weak economy play? This has been a wild and turbulent year. There is no reason to think that will change between now and November.