

**“Topsy-Turvy Election 2008
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The 2008 presidential election has been one of the most amazing races in recent memory. Every time, a Democratic candidate appears to be gaining momentum, the opponent does well and confounds the conventional wisdom. And on the Republican side, John McCain’s obituary was written in Summer, 2007, yet he came back and now has the delegates to secure his party’s nomination.

In this report, I review the “topsy-turvy” election that has unfolded this year. I discuss how this campaign has confounded the conventional wisdom and shattered old “truths” about media, money, and message. Many of the principles that have guided past races seem less relevant to 2008. The twisting nature of this year’s election raises interesting questions about campaign strategy, media power, and voting behavior.

Myth Number One: Well-Funded Candidates Win

Money is tremendously important in American elections and it often is thought that the best funded candidate wins. With his January fundraising advantage over Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama was able to outspend her by a 2 to 1 or 3 to 1 margin in most of the February primary and caucus states. That helped him win 11 states in a row and it appeared that his momentum would be unstoppable.

However, the March 4th primary states of Ohio, Texas, and Rhode Island demonstrate that the candidate who spends the most money does not always triumph. In Rhode Island, Obama outspent Clinton by a 3 to 1 margin, yet she carried the state by 58 to 40 percent. According to network exit polls, she won by capturing 66 percent of the women’s vote, 67 percent of the senior citizen’s vote, and 66 percent of the Catholic vote.

In Ohio, Clinton took advantage of voter anxiety regarding the economy to reposition herself as an economic populist. She said the middle class was being squeezed, corporations were receiving unfair advantages, and those without connections had no one to fight for them. Despite being outspent 2 to 1, she beat Obama by double-digits.

Texas proved to be much more competitive, but with the support of women, senior citizens, and Hispanics, Clinton again beat back Obama’s fundraising advantage and narrowly carried the Texas primary. The clear lesson of these early March primaries is that money does not always triumph over message.

Myth Number Two: The Media Are Powerful and Determine Who Wins

In many respects during campaign 2008, the media consensus consistently has been proven wrong. McCain’s early collapse is a noteworthy example. During the summer of 2007, McCain’s campaign fell completely apart. He had no money, he fired virtually his entire top political staff, and his close ties to the Iraq surge and President Bush looked like they represented fatal flaws.

Yet McCain came back, overcame the media criticisms, and proved that he is a formidable candidate who should not have been written off. He runs well among Independents, and has strong national security credentials during a time when foreign policy represents an incredible challenge for American policymakers.

On the Democratic side, the ups and downs of candidate fortunes have proven as numerous as the twists and turns of the Amazon River. First, Clinton appeared the unstoppable candidate during Fall of 2007. Then Obama won Iowa and media reporting suggested Clinton

was on the verge of being forced out of the race. Then she won New Hampshire and was able to prove her viability.

She won several big states on Super Tuesday, but was not able to jump very far ahead of Obama. He then used his grass roots support to win 11 states in a row during the month of February. News stories forecast dire straits for Clinton and a possible exit from the race after the March 4th primaries. Now, her victories in Ohio and Texas have relaunched her campaign and once again confounded the media experts.

Unlike past years, when the candidate with media momentum often went on to become the party nominee, voters seem to be using frontrunner status as a negative cue. Each time, someone on the Democratic side has leaped ahead and earned media momentum, voters have knocked down that presumptive favorite and allowed the challenger to remain viable.

Myth Number Three: Voters Are Apathetic

The real story of Election 2008 has been the record turnouts in virtually every state. Iowa and New Hampshire started the process by seeing large numbers of voters come out to cast ballots. Many states thereafter have followed the same model.

The largest turnout increases have been on the Democratic side. Similar to the 2006 election when Democrats recaptured control of the U.S. House and Senate, it is the Democratic base that is ticked off due to the Iraq war and the faltering economy.

Nominees of both parties have to understand this is a “message” election in which voters are engaged in the process, they are paying attention to what the major candidates say and do, and they are turning out in record numbers. The strong voter interest seen during the early primaries will carry over into the Fall general election. Voters are not apathetic this year. They feel their vote matters and are engaged in the process.

Myth Number Four: Attack Ads Always Work

There is evidence on both sides of this proposition. If attack ads always were effective, Mitt Romney would have been the GOP nominee. He spent nearly \$50 million of his own resources to run a very professional and well-funded campaign. As Rudy Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, and John McCain led the field at various points in time, Romney’s attack ads challenged each opponent.

But there is no evidence that any of those attacks worked. Romney’s negative spots were not able to derail McCain’s candidacy nor did his strong criticisms matter much in the end.

On the Democratic side, the picture is more mixed. During Obama’s meteoric 11-state march in the month of February, Clinton’s attacks were not effective. She complained about soft media treatment of the Illinois Senator, his campaign tactics, and his health care program yet none of these attacks derailed the Obama Express.

It wasn’t until the March 4th primaries that her attacks on his national security credentials and his readiness to become Commander-in-Chief started to resonate with voters. A last-minute ad in Texas asking who should answer a 3 am phone call at the White House argued that Obama was not that man.

Exit polls indicate that the ad helped cement voter perceptions that Clinton was more qualified to be president than Obama. In Texas, for example, 55 percent of Democratic primary voters felt that Clinton was most qualified, while only 39 percent felt that way about Obama.

Myth Number Five: “Base” Candidates Do Well

One of George Bush’s trademarks over the past decade has been playing to his political base. Recognizing that the country was polarized between Left and Right, Bush and his then

chief political advisor Karl Rove understood that they could win elections in 2000 and 2004 by targeting sympathetic voters and turning out core supporters.

In 2008, though, Republicans have chosen as their standard-bearer the candidate who does much better among the political center than he does with the party base. In most states during this year's election, McCain has earned stronger support from Independents than Republicans. Indeed, conservatives have expressed deep concern with whether McCain is one of "them" and shares their political values. Regardless of these concerns, however, McCain beat the GOP field and likely will run a centrist rather than a party base strategy.

On the Democratic side, the jury still is out on "base" politics. In terms of partisan support, Obama in most states runs stronger among Independents while Clinton does best among Democrats. She is winning the votes of women, senior citizens, and working class people, while he attracts support from Independents, voters under the age of 30, and those who are more upscale in terms of education and income.

If base politics no longer works, Obama should be the Democratic nominee. He is the one similar to McCain who is stronger in the political center than with the party base. But it is not clear whether the politics of centrism or pulling out the traditional Democratic base is going to be most effective. It is going to take several more primary states to determine the answer to that question.

Myth Number Six: People Vote Based on Who Is Ahead in the Polls

Bandwagon effects often have been thought to be very important in elections. Candidates who run well in polls generally are believed to have an advantage. According to the theory, voters like to support "winners" so the candidate who is ahead is the one who will attract voter support.

What this theory ignores, though, is the existence of the underdog effect. Voters like winners, but they also like to surprise the experts and confound the pundits. There are many cases in American electoral history where upsets have taken place. Candidates who were not thought to have much political strength have done well and beaten better known and better financed front-runners.

There has been considerable evidence in support of the underdog thesis in Election 2008. Giuliani was the presumptive GOP leader for much of 2007, yet spent \$50 million and won only one delegate. Obama became the Democratic frontrunner after Iowa, but then lost New Hampshire.

The numerous twists and turns along the nominating process this year demonstrates that voters do not let pollsters tell them how to vote. They are concerned about Iraq, the economy, health care, taxes, education, and immigration much more than polls. As conditions change, they are perfectly capable of confounding the polls and voting their values and preferences as they judge them.

Myth Number Seven: American Elections Have Little Substance

Critics sometimes condemn American elections as popularity contests that are devoid of substance and do not provide voters with serious choices. If there is any election that disputes that notion, it is Election 2008. In state after state, voters have grappled with the issues and made assessments based on their views regarding foreign and domestic policy.

Fitting for a long campaign that started over a year ago (Romney ran his first ad in February, 2007), changing economic conditions have led to different assessments. In 2007, when the economy was stronger, foreign policy considerations clearly outweighed domestic policy.

However, this year, the national economy has weakened and economic and trade issues have moved to the forefront. In some industrial states, the loss of manufacturing jobs has sent

local economies reeling and created extreme economic anxiety. These concerns led Senator Clinton to retool her message around economic populism and repositioned her as a fighter for the middle class.

New substantive developments also have proven to be a big plus for Senator McCain. With Bush's "surge" strategy reaping some benefits in terms of reduced violence and some normalization of daily life, McCain moved from the deathbed to reinvigoration. A policy that earlier appeared to represent the kiss of death for a political candidate proved to be a virtue for him.

At various steps along the way, voters have indicated they are paying close attention to policy performance and have adjusted their candidate preferences as new information has come along. Rather than being devoid of substance, Campaign 2008 has been a message election that has proved to be quite substantive.