

# For McCain in Pennsylvania, it Takes a Bush

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*by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young*

On the campaign trail, one of Hillary Clinton's favorite quips was the one about it taking still another Clinton to clean up the messes of yet another Bush. John McCain, who will soon be running hard in Pennsylvania, isn't known to seek advice from Hillary, but he might well adapt her tidy formulation to his uphill race in the state. In McCain's case; however, both Hillary's logic and her phrase are reversed; for McCain it won't be another Clinton cleaning up the problems of a Bush, but rather adopting another Bush's political game plan to finish up what a Clinton started.

The Bush in this case is Bush 41, George Herbert Walker Bush, and the last Republican presidential candidate to win in Pennsylvania. And the Clinton is Hillary herself, whose April campaign against Obama in Pennsylvania revealed the Democratic presumptive nominee's grievous weaknesses among culturally conservative working class white voters. To win Pennsylvania McCain needs to pick up where Hillary ended, and he needs to follow Bush's 1988 political map to get there.

More specifically, the argument for McCain in Pennsylvania is three-fold:

- McCain needs to beat Obama in Pennsylvania.
- Clinton showed how it can be done.
- George Bush Senior's 1988 campaign shows where.

McCain Needs to Win Pennsylvania

On paper one can fashion an Electoral College map that gets John McCain into the White House without going through Pennsylvania. Indeed, George Bush won the White House twice despite losing the state twice. But moving from paper to the real world will be a difficult proposition in this challenging political year for Republicans. Unlike either 2000 or 2004, many normally Bush states are in play-states like New Mexico, Colorado, Virginia, and Iowa, and some of them are probably going to end up in the Democratic column. This means that McCain must pick up some states that Bush lost as well as hold onto battleground states like Ohio and Florida. In fact, the tightest contests may well be in big electoral vote rich states like Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. As much as in any other battleground state, Pennsylvania voters seem ripe for a McCain pitch. Filled with working class voters worried about the economy, they are also cultural conservatives, wary of liberal Democrats, fond of independents, and historically responsive to moderate Republicans. If McCain can hold on in Florida and Ohio and pick up Pennsylvania, that would probably seal the deal for him.

Clinton Showed it Can be Done

Hillary Clinton's nine point victory over Barack Obama in the Pennsylvania Democratic primary revealed Barack Obama's dual Achilles heels in the Keystone state: geography and demography. Geographically his problems are in the western part of the state; demographically they are with blue collar working class, Catholic, senior citizen, and union voters. Senator Clinton's edge in the western counties over Obama was substantial: 79 percent in Fayette, 71 percent in Washington, 70 percent in Beaver, and 55 percent in Erie.

Obama's poor performance among core Democratic constituencies in strategic Democratic counties represents a potential problem for him that transcends merely racially motivated voting. Many of these voters are conservative pro-life, pro-gun adherents, once known nationally as Reagan Democrats and in Pennsylvania itself known as Casey Democrats for those who supported Governor Robert P. Casey.

#### George Herbert Walker Bush's 1988 Campaign Shows the Way

The last Republican presidential candidate to win the Keystone state was George Herbert Walker Bush, who won in a 51 to 48 percent squeaker. Whereas Clinton's 2008 win revealed the demographics receptive to a McCain candidacy, Bush's 1988 win provides the geography of a possible victory in the state.

The key to Bush's 1988 victory was holding onto the Philadelphia suburbs while losing only two counties, Lackawanna and Philadelphia-east of the Susquehanna. Since 1988 state population shifts have made the eastern part of the state even more important. To win Pennsylvania, Republican candidates must now hold their core base in South Central Pennsylvania around Harrisburg, win the Philadelphia suburbs, and hold down large Democrat majorities in the western part of the state and in Philadelphia.

Alas for the GOP, this previously practiced strategy has proven more difficult to execute over the past several elections. Indeed, the problems Republicans now have winning in the East presents McCain with his most serious challenge, but also perhaps his most promising opportunity. For here McCain's maverick, self-styled independence provides him with some realistic prospect, especially in the Philly suburbs which Bush 41 last won. These are the same Philly suburbs that Obama lost to Senator Clinton. McCain's ability to attract Independent voters who live there in abundance gives him a realistic shot.

McCain's roadmap to victory in Pennsylvania won't be taking him onto any super highways. Instead he is going to have to walk it out region by region, county by county, and demographic by demographic-reminding suburban voters that they once liked Republicans and that he, McCain, is the kind of Republican they liked.

It won't be easy. Obama has a slight lead as the race begins, pegged at between two and eight points by *Real Clear Politics*. Moreover, Pennsylvania has only voted for one Republican for president in the past five elections. And Bush fatigue aggravated by a weak economy and Iraq make the climate for Republicans unpromising.

These are the conditions McCain faces as we enter the summer months. His options are few. He probably must win Pennsylvania to win the White House. Challenging as that may be, it is clearly not unthinkable for him to do it. Two months ago a Clinton showed how it could be done; twenty years earlier a Bush showed him where to do it. November will reveal if either of those lessons has been learned.

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