

The Obama Paradigm

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A considerable number of American writers and political analysts are finding themselves fully occupied these days trying to explain the Obama phenomena: how a little known, lightly experienced, African American candidate has rocketed from virtual obscurity to challenging a formidable array of better known and more widely experienced opponents for a major party presidential nomination.

Explaining Barack Obama and putting him into meaningful political and historical context is indeed challenging--partly because the presidential selection process itself is messy and complex. But more pointedly, explanations for Obama are elusive because he is singular as a political persona, virtually *sui generis* among contemporary politicians. He simply doesn't fit into the established political categories we use to interpret contemporary events and analyze contemporary politicians. He is a very different kind of candidate who is running a very different race than we have seen in America for some time.

In short the Obama phenomenon may present a new paradigm in American politics, and to understand it we have to develop and use a new set of ideas, concepts, and categories to explain what is happening in our presidential politics. In particular four new conditions discussed below seem to comprise the Obama paradigm. Collectively they point to a radically new and potentially transformative force in American politics.

New Paradigm # 1: Race Is Not Relevant

First there is the lack of any apparent racial dimension to his candidacy. Obama is certainly now winning the hearts of African American voters, but he is viewed neither by whites nor blacks as the candidate of black America. Excepting the media driven tempest in a teapot in recent days, the race factor has played little part in the rise of Obama as a formidable candidate. This fundamentally turns American electoral politics upside down. Race has been the elemental compound in US politics since the long struggle for civil and voting rights in the 1960's. And racial voting has been an electoral given in virtually every national election. Yet for the Obama candidacy race, it is not a factor in how voters evaluate him or choose to support him. Had he waved a magic wand and made racism go poof it would not have been more remarkable.

New Paradigm # 2: Experience Confers No Advantage

How Obama has emerged as a political phenomenon will be studied for generations, but there are relatively few historical parallels. Rarely do politicians of short political experience emerge as front runners much less receive serious attention as presidential candidates. Certainly Obama has been helped by Hillary Clinton's "40 percent problem," the constraint imposed on her candidacy by the some 40 percent of voters who indicate they have a dislike for her or won't vote for her. Moreover the change mantra so persistent this year renders inexperience a virtue. Nevertheless very few candidates have won a party nomination with as little experience and modest substantive accomplishment as Obama. If elected, his brief service in the Illinois legislature and even briefer service in the US Senate would make him one of the least experienced candidates elected in American history.

New Paradigm # 3: The Old Ins Become the New Outs

The Obama campaign pits the old establishment forces led by the Clintons against the new order of younger, change-oriented voters who, for the most part, have never been active or have not been active in politics for a

generation. In nine of ten elections, the establishment wins and wins handily. But that verity has been turned on its head in 2008. In some ways, today's scene resembles the new politics of the Vietnam War days. Then the old establishment figure, liberal hero, and civil rights advocate, Hubert Humphrey, came to represent the forces of reaction, while the insurgent anti-war candidacies of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy led the opposition. The ensuing intra-party battle unleashed a passionate iconoclasm within the Democratic Party that shattered the political status quo. Like 1968 the aura of a generational change represented by Obama hangs over this election.

New Paradigm # 4: Not Only Does Rhetoric Matter, It Matters Most

Obama's change message, now articulated by candidates of both parties, is neither new nor distinctive. He has positions on all major issues, but the campaign is neither about issues nor the sum of the parts. It is essentially thematic without much issue salience, other than the impassioned appeal to end partisan bickering and create "hope" for a better future. His message is quintessential American populism: lofty but not loony in its delivery--part evangelist, part salesman. The rhetoric is soaring but soothing, and it is rhetoric that resonates for many voters. Indeed Obama's oratorical flourishes have been magnificent, evoking recall of oratorical giants like Lincoln, La Follette, John Kennedy, and Reagan. To appreciate him, one has only to contrast a youthful Bill Clinton lulling the 1988 convention delegates to sleep with a long, boorish opening address. How different were Obama's efforts on the national stage at the Democratic convention in 2004 or at his victory speech in Iowa or his subsequent speech in New Hampshire? No candidate since William Jennings Bryan in the 19th century has captivated a party with rhetoric as Obama has done.

The debate about the Obama phenomenon will rage for some time. Is he merely a historical curiosity in the mold of William Jennings Bryan, whose appeals moved thousand to tears but whose ultimate fate was to be crushed ignominiously by electoral defeats? Or is he more like John Kennedy in 1960 that transmuted populist appeals and generational change into the spirit of Camelot--lifting the spirits of the nation and attracting a new generation of Americans into government service and politics?

In the end, we expect Obama will neither be relegated to the footnotes of history like Bryan nor raised to the heights of political sanctity as was Kennedy. Instead he is more likely to be remembered as the first authentic 21st century presidential candidate--as arguably Theodore Roosevelt was the first 20th century candidate and Thomas Jefferson the first 19th century candidate. As such Obama, like Roosevelt and Jefferson before him, transcends traditional categories we have constructed to analyze and understand presidential candidacies. A candidate that seemed to be at the start a round peg in a square hole as Roosevelt was a century ago, might turn out to be the candidate that produces a whole new blueprint of how to run for and win the presidency.

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